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Reports

Writing Across the Country

Progress Reports on How to Teach and Do It

SPREAD OUT BUT CLOSE

Conversations and Collaborations: Eloquentia Perfecta on 21st Century Jesuit Campuses

**Laurie Ann Britt-Smith,
Lisa Zimmerelli, Cinthia Gannett,
and John Kerrigan**

How can the tradition of *eloquentia perfecta* still animate our current sense of rhetorical education? The Jesuit Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, an association of interested writing faculty from the 28 American Jesuit colleges, was founded over a decade ago, prompted by the need to recover and re-imagine what is vital about Jesuit rhetorical education for the 21st century. In this Jesuit-lay collaboration, faculty in rhetoric-composition meet and communicate regularly to sponsor colloquia, summer institutes, presentations, published scholarship, and pedagogical reform. Our voluntary association promises to help create and sustain a new version of *eloquentia perfecta* across curricula, programs, and institutions aligned with current views of Jesuit mission and identity which join academic excellence and social justice.

As one example of this work, we teacher-scholars at four distinctly different and geographically-dispersed Jesuit institutions, all partners in the Jesuit

Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, responded to a call for papers at the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing Conference in Ireland (2011). We worked together to prepare a presentation, “The Spiritual Life of Writing” on joining the reflective/ spiritual and academic uses of writing. This drew from our own institutional approaches, but transformed to a unified whole as we worked online, met in Limerick, presented together, and responded to the useful questions and thoughtful feedback of our international audience.

As fellow travelers exploring the extension of the Jesuit rhetorical tradition into the 21st century teaching of writing, we learned as we taught, first for our international presentation, and then as we have worked on this article and other projects together and on our own campuses. This primarily digital collaboration (email, Skype, google docs) is one means by which we enact and model *eloquentia perfecta*. We challenge ourselves to generate writing that reflects all our individual voices, yet also forms a larger whole. This process can be arduous, requiring more time to complete a project than if we attempted to keep the conversation smaller. Yet we find real value in making the effort to understand each other's and our own imperfect (unfinished) efforts. We have discovered that we need to mind the gap between our aim of eloquence and our (and each other's) daily scribbles, maintaining a delicate balance of *magis* and *cura personalis* in our companionship in order

for the collaboration to be successful.

But beyond the writing itself, our work evokes the Jesuit notion of the collaborative process of learning and acting, “*nuestro modo de proceder*”—listening, sharing, and attending to what is common and unique about our contexts, then moving forward through language together. Our collaboration has led us to better appreciate and share the features of *eloquentia perfecta* that our programs strive to enact. That is, what is distinctive about our collaboration is the way it forges an interrelationship between/ among us and our work on campuses. We realize, for example, that we are all interested in synthesizing the role of rhetoric and reflection as central program aims and in identifying ways to teach language as a means of forming “men and women for others.”

These initiatives take very different forms, given institutional histories, structures, and resources, but they each have important contributions to make to our conversation. At Rockhurst University, we learn, discussions between first-year writing faculty and disciplinary faculty, noting the convergence of reflection as a “best practice” in teaching writing and Ignatian pedagogy, developed ways to infuse and assess a reflective pedagogy. Similarly, Fairfield University's developing core writing course sequence supports its core pathway, *Rhetoric and Reflection*, and it is sustaining institution-wide interest by engaging the faculty broadly as “a community of writers” through the Center for Academic Excellence.

Like Fairfield, the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), has also revised its writing program, improved its writing center, and adopted new learning outcomes in the soon to be implemented core curriculum which focus on the development of ethos, language as civic action, and other enduring rhetorical competences. At Loyola University Maryland (LUM), the writing department enacts the centrality of writing and rhetoric by bringing together the core writing course, a writing major and minor, writing-across-the-curriculum support (including a Loyola writing handbook with contributions from every department), and the writing center into an integrated ensemble of initiatives. Their writing center extends the ideal of *social justice* into the larger Baltimore community through its high school peer tutoring program.

As we confer across campuses, our mutual commitment to *eloquentia perfecta* bears a transformational capacity. *Accompanying* each other in the Jesuit sense, with humility—not appropriating each other's projects, but being in dialogue with each other as we choose how to proceed, cultivates our sense of self-awareness and criticism, and has opened avenues of possibility that have enhanced our individual work. Our ongoing collaborative work will continue to focus on Jesuit rhetorical practice for discernment and action in service of the common good, grounded in best practices in contemporary composition and rhetoric. And when we grow frustrated by the pace and complex negotiations of group writing and the long trail of drafts, emails, and conversations, we remind ourselves that the first great Jesuit educational document, the Ratio of 1599, was the result of countless iterations, reports, revisions. We have to laugh and ask, Why should it be any different now?

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A Course to Blog About

Laura Davies and Erin Mullally

A few weeks ago, Laura stumbled upon a blog one of her writing students kept. To her surprise, the student cared enough about what they had talked and wrote about to post her essays about critical writing and Ignatian spirituality on her very non-academic blog. In one post, she wrote: 'Though I am not even halfway through the semester, I feel like this course has already helped me to grow a lot and come to terms with who I am ...'

We believe that this student found her critical writing course meaningful because of the nature of the course. For fall 2011, we designed a pilot first-year writing course at Le Moyne College that enacted Ignatian pedagogy: teaching writing through a holistic pedagogical framework that emphasized 1) care of the individual student, 2) individual reflection and self-evaluation, and 3) a concern for the ethical ramifications of rhetorical acts.

We had five sections of freshman composition, approximately one hundred students. We wanted students to approach writing through Ignatian pedagogy. We also wanted them to see who the man behind the curtain was, naming for them the processes we were following, so they could contemplate our classroom practices and writ-

ing prompts as arguments themselves. The assignments and classroom activities were all selected to stage teaching as a rhetorical activity.

The course was organized around a progression of three questions: What is Jesuit higher education for? What does it mean to be a college writer today? What does it mean to get a college education in the 21st century?

First, the students explored the 450-year history of the Jesuit order and read about Ignatian spirituality, the worldview of Ignatius of Loyola, and scholarship about the Catholic intellectual tradition (including selections by John Paul II, John Henry Newman, Adolfo Nicolás, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, James Martin, Monica Hellwig and Kevin Clarke). These works gave the course a foundation upon which to explore contemporary merits of liberal arts education and the pros and cons of campus life in authors including Mark Edmundson, Louis Menand, Mary Eberstadt and Donna Frietas. The specific shared vocabulary alone allowed for nuanced conversation as the students noted the frequent use of these same terms throughout their campus.

Then students read scholarship in composition and rhetoric (selections by Gerald Graff, Lester Faigley, Mike Rose, Rebecca Moore Howard, Donald Murray and Walter Ong), challenging them to find connections between Ignatian pedagogy and the theories that inform our understanding about inquiry, rhetoric and digital technology, the writing process, collaborative writing with sources, and academic argument as conversation.

Although we found the course engaging, we noticed some limitations. We designed the course with the traditional first-year, first-semester college student in mind. Many of our students fit this category, but not all. The older, non-traditional students found the course meaningful, but in different ways than we expected. One, an Army